

smoffett. triumph.lec (Nov. 1997)

TRIUMPHALISM: A TEMPTATION FOR EVANGELICALS
(Rom. 8:37-39; II Cor. 2:14; Phil. 2:5-8)

Ever since I agreed to call my subject "Triumphalism", to match all the other "isms" in this series, I've been trying to decide what I mean by "triumphalism". I know liberals who are as triumphalist about social transformation through politics, as some evangelicals are about bringing in the millennium through church growth.

What is the triumphalism I want to talk about? There are so many varieties. Is it nationalism—is it more important to keep a church triumphantly, nationally unified than to keep it free for Christian mission—as when Russian Orthodoxy tries to block Baptist or evangelical or Catholic missions? Is it imperialism—as when Christian mission is tied so closely to the expansion of triumphing, conquering empires, Portuguese, Spanish, British or whatever, that it provokes a nationalist reaction? Is it economic imperialism—as when rich donor missions dominate poorer, struggling 3rd world churches? Is it cultural imperialism—the Christian west posing as a model for what are patronizingly described as lesser, more primitive civilizations? Is it theological and spiritual triumphalism if foreign missionaries claim that their Christian faith is better than all the other great religions of the world. Any one of these varieties of what could be called triumphalism could serve as the subject of a whole lecture in itself.

But that last category—the claim of a unique saving truth in the Christian message of faith in Christ alone as Saviour—brings us face to face with a basic charge brought again and again against the Christian world mission: that Christian missions, and especially evangelical Christian missions, are triumphalist.

Well, in that case, my first answer will be, what's wrong with triumphalism? If to be Christocentric is triumphalist, there must be something right about triumphalism. Isn't that what St. Paul is talking about when he says to the Romans (8:37-39), "We are more than conquerors"; and again to the Corinthians (II, 2:14), "But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumph.."? That last verse actually thanks God for

triumphalism in mission: "Thanks be to God who in Christ always leads us in triumph, and through us spreads the fragrance of him everywhere." And isn't triumphalism very near what Calvinists mean by "the fifth letter of the Calvinist code, the P in TULIP, for "the Perseverance of the Saints."? We are not called to perish but to persevere and to conquer. We triumph even over death for we have the gospel, the good news of everlasting life. Our Protestant cross is an empty cross: the resurrected Christ, not a dead Christ still hanging limp and defeated on a Roman cross, but a Christ triumphant. He conquered even death. So what's wrong with triumphalism?

Well, there is something wrong with it. I want to suggest in this brief lecture, that the problem with triumphalism is not in the triumph, but in the "ism". And even with the "ism" I prefer it to its opposite, "defeatism". As a missionary I have been beset and tempted by both defeatism and triumphalism, and if I have learned anything in my own attempt to "do mission", when and if I have to choose between triumphalism and defeatism, I prefer to choose a modest, motivating touch of triumphalism rather than surrender to the crippling despair of defeatism. But having said that, let me warn you. Even a touch of triumphalism carries seeds of a sin which any wind can blow up into disaster. The sin is pride. So in choosing against defeatism, don't find yourself shouting "I'm a triumphalist and proud of it". The word deserves its label, Remember that the same Paul who tells us "We are more than conquerors", describes himself as a slave, a slave of Christ. And when the Christ whose slave Paul was, when the third Person of the triune Godhead was sent on his mission to the world, he came not as a conqueror, but as a very human baby, and there is no triumphalism in the way that baby died. There is no triumphalism about a death on a cross.

In this way of looking at triumphalism, I define it more as an attitude than a heresy, and as a personal attitude than an organized movement, as a learned attitude which requires discipline. Though it can often be manipulated and organized it is not an ineradicable genetic defect in the strategy of the Christian world mission. Nor is it an unchangeable element in the construct of Western civilization. Where it is right, it has its motivating usefulness; but where it is wrong it must be recognized and changed. It is personal.

And if it is a personal attitude, I am going to have to be personal in describing it. So let me be really personal. Let me stop lecturing you, and simply begin to tell you about how I began to learn the rights and wrongs about triumphalism in mission.

Why did I go to China as a missionary? Looking back I can smell triumphalism in the very way it happened. Right here in Princeton. In Miller Chapel. And who was responsible? The President of the Board of Princeton Theological Seminary, Robert E. Speer, blessed be his name, who was at the same time Secretary of the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions. Robert E. Speer a triumphalist? Perish the thought. We named our Library for him. But Robert E. Speer stood up in Miller Chapel one morning to talk about missions and at one point he stopped, and held up his watch, and said, "Men, this watch could tick for nine and a half years without numbering the unbelievers in China alone. There are that many people in China who have never been given an adequate chance to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ." And I was hooked. I went to China.

If you are expecting me to apologize for Dr. Speer, you are going to be disappointed. That motive sent me to China, and I am still a missionary, an evangelistic missionary, even in Princeton. The evangelistic motive, to proclaim Jesus Christ as the only Saviour, has sent more missionaries across the world than any other single call to mission in the history of the church, and it still sends more foreign missionaries from more different countries than any other motive. It is an evangelical call to mission. But isn't it triumphalist?

Well, that depends on the missionary. If his or her attitude is triumphalist, yes. But if the triumph in his message is Jesus Christ, whereas his attitude as he goes is, as one very wise Sri Lankan Christian, D. T. Niles, put it, like a sinner to sinners, like a slave of Christ, "like one beggar going to another beggar with bread", then his message is and should he triumph, but his mission is not triumphalist.

My going to China, then, may have had a touch of triumphalism about it. I am afraid that as eager, optimistic young missionary I may have given the impression that we, the newer breed of missionaries, were about to save China all by ourselves. But when

I left China four years later, the temptation was to its opposite, not triumphalism but defeatism. When I left China I was about as discouraged and defeated as any missionary has any right to let himself become.

When I left China there had once been 8,000 Protestant missionaries in the country, now in 1951 there were less than a hundred, probably less than 50 left. There were 3,000,000 Chinese Christians (1 million Protestants; 2 million Catholics), and the communists gleefully told us, "When we get rid of you foreign missionaries, the Chinese churches will wither away". And I was beginning to believe them. Back home, the Board of Foreign Missions gave us a debriefing, and asked us to list the mistakes we had made that brought China missions to such a melancholy ending.

I remembered how when the communists came in, they told the people we have no homes, no families, we have given up everything for you, and the soldiers swept the streets for them in the villages. Whereas I was still living in a comfortable stone house, with rugs on the floor. And I felt very guilty. During the next few years I spent a good deal of the time, when speaking about missions, apologizing for our failures. I was still apologizing one day, more than 30 years later, after the death of Mao Tze-Dung, when I was speaking about the church in China, and a Chinese student from the mainland who was visiting Princeton came up to me, and said, "Dr. Moffett, don't keep saying you failed." And I murmured something about how, "Yes I was a failure; it is you Chinese Christian who were not failure" But he interrupted, "No you were not a failure. The Lord sent you to China and He doesn't send out failures. You missionaries gave us the gospel, and the gospel never fails."

It changed my message about China. The triumph came back in, without the triumphalism. And the facts hacked me up. When I left China there were 3 million Christians, but they didn't wither away. It is the communists who are withering. There are ten times as many Christians in China as when I left, at least 30 million, and some say 60 million, which would be an increase of twenty times the former number. As one Chinese Christian remarked to a recent visitor, "We are the survivors. We were once bitten by the tiger but failed to grind us small enough to swallow. Its claws left scars on our faces, so we are not handsome. [But we are survivors]". And another said, "We not

only survived... Look at us now, we grew!" (Carol Lawrence, The Church in China, Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1985, pp. 113, 121). Not triumphalists, but "more than conquerors".

Let me go on to Korea. It is difficult for Christians not to be triumphalist about Korea. And especially difficult for Presbyterians. When my father went to Korea in 1890 less than 1 Korean in 1,000 was a Christian. When I was in school there in the 1930s the ratio was 1 in 50. When I went back in 1955 it was 1 in 20; and today, it is claimed, it may well be 1 in every 3 Koreans. There are more Presbyterians in Korea than in the United States. In fact, there are more Presbyterians in Korea than there are Scots in all Scotland. Am I beginning to triumphalist? That much won't hurt you American Presbyterians. Your problem is you're losing. You're defeatist. But cheer up. Those Korean Presbyterians are gaining more followers for Jesus Christ than you lose every year. You lose about 40,000 a year. Just one branch of Presbyterians in Korea win twice that number almost every year.

How do they do it? Well, with a little touch of triumphalism, as in that song of Mary Poppins, "Just a little bit of sugar makes the medicine go down." Except that I don't call it triumphalism. I call it Christian confidence, they are believers. And it is perseverance, the Presbyterian perseverance of the saints. They don't give up. Persecute them, and as in China, they still grow.

Presbyterianism began in Geneva with John Calvin. But the four largest Presbyterian church in the world are not in Geneva; they are in Seoul, Korea. And Methodism began in England with John Wesley. But the two largest Methodist churches in the world are not in England; they are in Seoul, Korea. And Pentecostalism, in its modern form, began in Southern California. But the largest Pentecostal church in the world is not in Southern California, but in Seoul, Korea. (Am I still sounding triumphalist? Would you rather have me talk about mainline churches in the United States?).

No, I'll continue with Korea, but without the taint of triumphalism that revelling in the numbers carries with it. I want to describe one church which, though it became the largest Presbyterian congregation in the world, did it without making large church growth its aim and goal. It is the Youngnak Presbyterian Church in downtown

Seoul, Korea, and I am happy to say that its founder and for decades its first pastor is a graduate of Princeton Theological Seminary, Dr. Han Kyung-Chik.

Han Kyung-Chik graduated in the class of 1929. He was no triumphantalist. He worked in the eating-room kitchen, and washed dishes to help pay his way. But before he could finish he came down with tuberculosis, left school and spent two years recovering his health in a sanatorium in Arizona. But he didn't give up. He came back to school, graduated, and prepared to go back to Korea. But how could he get back; he had run out of money. Well he got across the continent, partly with friends, partly by hitchhiking. But you can't hitchhike across the Pacific. So he got a job shoveling coal in the engine room of a freighter. Not the best environment for one recovering from TB. When he reached Korea he took a church clear up on the Yalu River, in the frozen north on the China border. And his church grew. He was so respected that he was elected mayor of Shin-Euiju, and it is interesting to note that it was as the candidate of the Korean Socialist Party which he helped to form, evangelist and pastor though he was, because he thought Christians had a duty to work for better government.

Then the communists came in, the Russians. That was 1945. And communists don't tolerate Christians in their brand of socialism. Their bully boys drove Han Kyung-Chik out as mayor, and began to harass him, and his congregation, and the Christians of Shin-Euiju. Finally, he decided it was time to try to escape to freedom in the south, and made it with 27 fellow refugees. The first thing they did with freedom was to organize themselves into a church. They called it Youngnak, the Church of Everlasting Joy, Presbyterian. And in ten years that church of 27 refugees became the largest Presbyterian congregation in the world. In time it had a congregation of 60,000 in that one

perhaps too large. Some of you should hive off like bees and start new churches where there aren't any." And they did. What the Church of Everlasting Joy, Presbyterian, is proud of is not its size, but its mission. Its goal is mission, not aggrandizement. Its goal is to spread the good news about Jesus to the whole world, not keep it to themselves.

They tell me that there are now more than 350 Presbyterian churches around the world that call themselves "Youngnak", in honor of their mother church. And Han-Kyung Chik was given the Templeton Prize a few years ago, the richest prize in the world, given for contribution to the progress of religion in the world. But it did not make him triumphalist. He lives very simply. When Prince Philip handed him the check for one million dollars, he looked at it and said, "But what should I do with it? I don't have a checking account." And when German television crews hovered around him in Berlin, one commentator said to him, "Dr. Han, we hear you have started new churches all around the world." And he said, "Oh, I didn't start them. My people have done that, our church's missionaries." And they said, "Why don't you start one here in Berlin?" And he smiled, "Don't you know? We already have one here."

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Numbers? Triumphant church growth? Yes. But the secret that kept them from becoming triumphalist was that numbers was not what they were looking for. And becoming the largest church in the world was not their goal. Quite the contrary. Pastor Han kept their eyes on a higher, wider goal. He said, "We're large enough. Some of you should hive off like bees and start new churches where there aren't any." And they did.